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Some Thoughts about the Visualization of the Dharma in the Representations
of Buddha**

Claudia MARRA

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仏陀の表現におけるダルマの視覚化について

マラ クラウディア

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Short Outline

Based on some basic observations about the role of the body in Buddhism, especially the physicality of Buddha and its connection to the teachings, this research note is an attempt to explain the notion that Buddhist imagery was intended as a medium for transmitting the Dharma.

概要

本論文の目的は、仏教における身体役割、特に釈迦様の身体性に関するいくつかの基本的な考察に基づいて、仏像の彫刻が佛法を伝えるための媒体として意図されていたことを説明することである。

Keywords

Buddha's body, Dissimination of the Dharma, Buddhist statuary
仏の身体性、仏法、仏陀

1. Introduction

Rather than focussing on specific doctrines and rituals of the major Hinayana (小乗), Vajrayana (密教) and Mahayana (大乘) schools, for this paper, I would like to regard Buddhism as a broad cultural system. The reason for this is, that all Buddhist schools, their diversification due to partly contradicting interpretations of sutras, different attitudes concerning the prerequisites and possibility of attaining buddhahood, etc., notwithstanding, aim to impart the Dharma to the people through various expedient means.

Discussing Buddhisms' fundamental persuasion that the world is not, what it looks like, and that there is the need for a more accurate understanding of self and reality, Rambelli (2013) lists up Buddhist strategies to "provide a more accurate representation of reality aimed at the attainment of enlightenment"¹ as follows:

"specialized terminology (...),

estrangement effects (...),

relativization of ordinary language (...),

detailed explanations of the relational nature of reality (...),
doctrines on the absolute language (...)
doctrines on the non-arbitrary,
motivated nature of language and signs (...),
widespread use of rituals (...),
textuality and exegetical strategies (...), and
a non-hermeneutical dimension (...) of texts." ²

Certainly, these strategies were, and still are, employed by the literate, monastic elites belonging to the manifold forms of monastic Buddhism, who, on their quest for (personal) enlightenment, were in the position to devote their lives to mastering complex ritual systems. However, with the spread of Buddhism as major religion throughout Asia, new tasks arose, including coming to terms with existing religions and rituals, dealing with existing cosmologies and thought systems, gaining the acceptance and financial support of the respective political elites, promising salvation for the country and its people, protection against catastrophes, misfortunes and demons, providing strategies for merit-making and spiritual improvement, and taking care of the population's need for ceremonies like funerals, etc.

With growing popularity and the spread of the religion arose a new emphasis on kammatic aspects and the need to disseminate the Dharma to broader echelons of society, including the illiterate.

One possibility to achieve this are pictorial or sculptural representations, which, antropomorphic or not, can be found in different variations of iconographic interpretations in all Buddhist schools.

This paper aims at shedding some light on the 'body-language' of Buddhist statuary, starting with an (unavoidably brief) look at the Buddhist concept of the human body in general, Buddha's attitude towards corporality and the connection between the body and the Dharma.

2 . The Buddhist concept of the human body

Again, due to the sheer number of Buddhist doctrines, one cannot agree on a unified and comprehensive theory. However, looking at early traditions, there seems to be agreement in the belief, that a person is an impermanent composite made up off consciousness and mental factors (nama), and physicality (rūpa), subdivided into different mutually dependent appropriation groups, called the 5 skandhas. ³

They are:

the bodys' materiality or form (rūpa),
sensations or feelings (vedanā),
perceptions or discriminations (samjñā),
volition or mental activities (samskāra), and
consciousness (vijñāna).

The 5 skandhas are further subdivided and finally fanned out into many more categories down to atom-level. The bottom line is that the materiality of the body can not exist without the immaterial, mentality related 4 skandhas, and vice versa. The resulting composite, however, is explained as devoid of any essential identity or self. An ontological distinction between 'body' and 'mind' is not intended. Sensations, perceptions, volition and consciousness function in the same way as bodily organs. Such being the mutual condition of materiality and mental factors, appears as a prerequisite for lifting the veil of illusions from an accurate perception of reality.

The body is the privileged site and prerequisite for the mental achievement of Buddhist teaching, the Dharma. On the other hand, the Dharma is viewed as a way to liberate oneself from the temptations, limitations and suffering of the body and thus overcome one's shortcomings in the true insight into reality.

3. Buddhas' bodies

The connection between the body and Dharma has its' roots in the vita of the historical Buddha. According to Buddhist tradition, the Shakyamuni Buddha, Siddharta Gautama, was brought up in the 5th or 6th century BCE in Lumbini, today's Nepal, as a prince in luxury and indulgence, before he started his search for the end of suffering. In line with ascetic movements of his time, he believed, that the extreme suppression of mental and physical activity and radical control over his body would help him break the eternal circle of rebirth and suffering. When the strictly observed rigour did not bring the desired success, the Buddha came to the insight that the 'Middle Way' lays in the balance between overindulgence and denial, as the existence of the body is a vital requirement in the effort to attain Buddhahood. After that realization, Shakyamuni himself being human, experienced his life-transforming enlightenment, and believed, that his followers could do so too - as this discourse to an inquiry of one of his disciples shows:

"I tell you, friend, that it is not possible by traveling to know or see or reach a far end of the cosmos where one does not take birth, age, die, pass away, or reappear. But at the same time, I tell you that there is no making an end of suffering & stress without reaching the end of the cosmos. Yet it is just within this fathom-long body, with its perception and intellect, that I declare that there is the cosmos, the origination of the cosmos, the cessation of the cosmos, and the path of practice leading to the cessation of the cosmos." ⁴ (Rohitassa Sutta AN 4.45)

However, this 'fathom-long body, with its perception and intellect' is also one of the reasons for the continuation of suffering, as the body, if one is not following the 'Noble Eightfold Path', is the origin of the cravings for food, sleep or sex, covetting or clinging to possessions, and worldly ambitions. Thus, Buddhism recommends a cenobitic lifestyle, as the regulations of monastic discipline help to focus on meditation and the achievement of enlightenment, by reducing complexity, minimalizing distractions and providing just enough sustenance to maintain health, as shown by the monastic

rules, which clearly show deep concern about the physical well-being of the human members of the Sangha.

Without being able to join the ongoing debate concerning humanity, super-humanity or divinity, and the varying interpretations on the nature of Buddha, I'd like to take Buddha at his word:

"When asked whether he was a deva or a human, he replied that he had eliminated the deep-rooted unconscious traits that would make him either one, and should instead be called a Buddha; one who had grown up in the world but had now gone beyond it, as a lotus grows from the water but blossoms above it, unsoiled." ⁵

Buddha's own understanding makes him a human, who "with his enlightenment (...), perfected and transcended his human condition." ⁶

However, after Shakyamuni's death, and his physical body gone, soon interpretations of Buddha as a transcendental being began to circulate, spawning the belief in countless, multi-layered Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Buddhist divinities. Buddhas, who were present in, and associated with every conceivable realm of space and time, and endowed with immeasurable salvific powers. In this way, different local religious traditions could be more easily absorbed, and the acceptance of Buddhism increased.

"By the time Buddhism reached Japanese shores, it had developed sophisticated theories of avatarism. The eminent scholar of Japanese folklore, Yamaori Tetsuo, has speculated that part of the appeal of Buddhism to the early Japanese was the fact that Buddhas and Bodhisattvas were capable of manifesting themselves in human form, with a panoply of anthropomorphic icons greatly enhancing the cult's attraction. In addition to their aesthetic appeal, Buddhist icons, when consecrated and installed in a temple hall, were regarded as honzon (principal objects of veneration) and treated as the functional equivalent of living Buddhas, repositories of sacred power and focal points for rituals and devotional activities." ⁷

4 . Buddha's body and the Dharma

Dharma refers to the essence of Buddha's doctrinal teachings, regarding the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, as they were gathered in the posthumously collected narrative format, the sutras. The historical Buddha's sermons were transmitted orally during the meeting of the First Buddhist Council some time after Buddha's death. The teachings continued to be transmitted orally until eventually being written down in the first century BCE. While some Buddhist schools regard the Dharma as Buddha's legacy, others consider it as supreme truth, although there remain some doubts about the authenticity of its conveyance. Also, there are many important or influential Mahayana texts, such as the Lotus Sutra, that are called sutras despite being attributed to much later authors. However, the Dharma is regarded by all schools as one of the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) and as such enjoys highest esteem. In Buddha's own words, the connection between his teaching and his physical presence was put like this:

“He who sees Dharma, oh Vakkali, sees me; he who sees me sees Dharma. Truly seeing Dharma, one sees me; seeing me one sees Dharma.”⁸ (Samyuttanika 22.87)

Right perception or truly seeing the Buddha is equated with the realization of the Dharma and vice versa. One can not exist without the other.

After Buddha's death, the key figures in the preservation of Buddha's teaching discourses were two of his foremost disciples, Ananda and Mahakashyapa. While Ananda listened to Buddha's sermons, he retained them in memory and passed them on orally, thus becoming the source for the canonic recording of the Dharma.

Mahakashyapa, on the other hand, is said to have attained enlightenment, when Buddha gave a wordless sermon to his disciples, holding up and twirling a flower. While the other disciples were confused, Kashyapa smiled. Seeing this, the World-Honored One spoke:

“I possess the True Dharma Eye, the Marvelous Mind of Nirvana, the True Form of the Formless, the Subtle Dharma Gate that does not rest on words or letters but is a special transmission outside of the scriptures. This I entrust to Mahakashyapa.”⁹

This episode illustrates why Mahakashyapa is considered the first patriarch of the Zen schools, as Zen maintains the possibility of an esoteric, wordless and direct transmission of the Dharma.

However, initially, both ways to pass on the doctrine require a corporal presence:

In the case of Ananda's story, Buddha is the speaker, and Ananda the listener, who memorizes and later recalls what he has heard, and, who himself, upon oral transmission, turns into a speaker, who is listened to. A process to be continued until the discourses were finally put down in writing, and henceforth by hand-written copying, reading and recitation - all of them again physical and mental activities.

In the case of Mahakashyapa, there is the presence of a moving body, which is seen and then recognized in its undescrivable suchness, and in this way evokes the understanding of the truth.

Considering the above-mentioned concept of rūpa, the narrative concerning the transmission of the Dharma employs all psycho-physical constituents of reality, including the 5 skandhas: the body with its sensations, perceptions, volition and consciousness. Thus, it is asserting the perfection and completeness of the Dharma, and in the case of esoteric Buddhism, mirroring the structure of the universe.

5. Statuary and the dissemination of the Dharma

After the historical Buddha's death, the Sangha was confronted with the task to preserve and spread the Dharma. One strategy was the preservation of relics. Through the presence of remains, they were naturally strongly connected to the body of Buddha and created thus a narrative of authenticity and an image of the Buddha's continuing presence. First gathered by Mahakashyapa and divided into 8 parts, Buddha's remains were regathered in the 5th century BCE by Emperor Asoka, divided into 84000 portions and then distributed through the realm. The relics were usually kept in Stupas, which Rambelli (2013) interprets in relation to the Buddha as an "alternative shape

of one another"¹⁰. Since in contemporary philosophies the human body was seen as a microcosmos related to the principles of the universe and the 5 cosmic elements, the Stupa form was seen as an appropriate representation of the Buddha and, in extension, the Dharma. A concept that was especially influential in tantric Buddhism.

When eventually a further distribution of relics became impossible due to the growing number of followers' communities, aniconic symbolic representations of the Buddha appeared: The focal point at this time was it to promulgate the word about the Buddha's enlightenment and his complete attainment of nirvana, hence early Buddhist statuary is known for the absence of their subject.¹¹

Instead, depictions of Buddha's feet, the Dharma Wheel, the Bodhi tree (where Buddha attained enlightenment), Buddha's robe or his footprints were chosen as motifs to spread the Dharma.

In this way, early cultic practice stressed the memory of the historical Buddha. It created a narrative centered around Shakyamuni's biography and important places and stations of his life, and emphasizes the transformation of a human into an enlightened being. The history and stations of Buddha's life and deeds were both, proof and incentive to follow in his footsteps.

Buddha's possessions were preserved as evidence of Shakyamuni's existence, and their new owners gained credibility through their acquisition.

This form of worship of the Buddha was partly inspired by Mahakyashapa's reverence for the robe, that he once had received from Shakyamuni as a symbol of the continuity of Buddha's teaching.

Here again, the handover of a piece of clothing as an intimate act of recognition, is strongly



connected to Buddha's physical presence, as the robe first had been worn directly on the body by the master, and subsequently clad his Dharma heir.

The foot-motive was inspired by the act of homage that Mahakyashapa had paid to the uncovered feet of the Buddha at his funeral. The footprint-motif indicates, that the Buddha indeed had stepped on the earth and that the Sangha was to follow his spiritual path.

The tradition of an-iconic statuary has not been discontinued since, and examples can be found all over the Buddhist realm, above an example from Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia.¹²

However, Buddhism does not deny the possibility of representation in human shape. So, with the development of the idea of countless multi-layered Buddhas anthropomorphic depictions started to become popular. In order to distinguish them from secular statuary and to make the Buddha easily recognizable, certain norms were established concerning the imagery. Detailing physical characteristics like proportions, the shape of the limbs, hair, attire and so on, they are called the '32 Characteristics of a Great Man', and are intended to further accentuate the image of Buddha's perfection. Supplemented by another 80 secondary characteristics, these detailed rules were meant to ensure, that in spite of the development of differing interpretations of the Dharma, the presence of the Buddha stayed constant. Furthermore, as the human form was employed in the statuary, this very shape of the body stood symbolic of the hope, that mere mortals may also reach Buddhahood. As such it promoted the Dharma and encouraged the onlooker to take refuge in the Three Jewels.

Nevertheless, soon after this type of statuary began to appear throughout the Buddhist realm, they sired ambivalent attitudes: The question, whether the statues were "mere substitutes for something, that can't be expressed otherwise and the belief in these objects as 'embodiment of the sacred endowed with autonomous agency and salvific power'"¹³

This ambiguity was especially aroused by statuary containing relics, copies of sutra or endowed with 'internal organs' (dedicatory zàng-fǔ organs, 五臟六腑).

Also, the staging of the statuary within sacred spaces created a new layer in the narrative of holiness and spiritual power that resonated with the Sangha. In a pre-secularized society unused to the separation of the secular and the transcendental, creating an aura of Buddha's presence surely helped to reassure believers of the value of their religious choice.

6. Conclusion

The emergence of Buddha images in normatively idealized and perfected human form shows the high esteem in which physicality in itself is held. Since the Dharma is invisible, an appropriate form of representation was desired. After an early phase of an-iconic representations, Buddha's disciples moved to anthropomorphic portrayals. This visualization strategy helped to make the Buddha more accessible and attempted to make the invisible visible. Through this, it reached out to those believers who had no chance to live in a monastery and to access the Dharma in written

form. Using statuary depicting Buddha's eight life phases further helped to evoke an understanding of Buddha's achievements. Detached from a function-bound and differentiating context of mere recognition, seeing itself, could become an act of cognition, and even refer to and highlight what one can not see, the Dharma.¹⁴

Displaying the statuary in sacred rooms and performing rituals further enhanced the aura of the Buddha. It also helped to dispel doubts, assure followers, give hope for the possibility of enlightenment, and record the presence of Buddha for posterity.

Doubtlessly is the spread of Buddhist statuary was also a demonstration of cultural achievement, political and religious power¹⁵, and financial means, and created an economic momentum, especially when the statuary became associated with miracles and wish-granting and subsequently advanced to focal points of pilgrimages or as a places for holding important rituals.

Notes

- 1 Rambelli (2013), p. xiii-xiv
- 2 *ibid*
- 3 Buswell (2014), p. 828
- 4 from the Rohitassa Sutta AN 4.45 transl. by Thanissaro Bhikkhu
<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an04/an04.045.than.html> (21.9.2022)
- 5 Harvey (1990), p. 28
- 6 *ibid*
- 7 Drott (2016), pp. 75
- 8 from Vakkali Sutta (Samyuttanika 22.87), translated from the Pali by Maurice O'Connell Walshe, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.087x.wlsh.html>
- 9 Dumoulin (2005), p. 9
- 10 Rambelli (2013), p. 55
- 11 Rambelli (2013), p. 11
- 12 Buddha's Golden Feet, outside the Gandan Monastery in Ulaan Baatar (Mongolia). Picture by the author.
- 13 Sharf (1999), pp. 75
- 14 Interestingly, a similar transfer happened regarding the act of hearing. The sound of a sutra recitation itself, its contents understood or not, was seen as an effective way to approach understanding of the Dharma. See: Marra: Through Hanjimonono to Enlightenment, in: The Journal of Nagasaki University of Foreign Studies Vol. 20, 2016, pp. 47-55
- 15 In this respect, the spread of both, an-iconic and anthropomorphic statuary can also be interpreted as the spread of markers for the territory of a religious community, an

understanding, that even in our times has not completely vanished as the destruction of the Buddha of Bamiyan in Afghanistan by the Taliban has shown.

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